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## LASIK surgeon helping Olympians focus on gold

BY TEHANI SCHNEIDER • STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 13, 2009

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EAST HANOVER - Standing atop the podium in Vancouver as the world's best in speedskating is a feat that reigning Olympic champion Chad Hedrick hopes to duplicate this winter.

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But the biggest change for Hedrick - since bringing home the gold from Torino, Italy four years ago - occurred off the ice. And it just may give him an edge that a grueling training regimen can't match.

The Texas-born Hedrick, 32, received free laser vision corrective surgery under a program courtesy of Morris County ophthalmologist Cary M. Silverman three months ago.

The program, LASIK for the Gold, was recently begun by Silverman at his East Hanover facility, EyeCare 20/20.

Silverman, a specialist in LASIK, or Laser-Assisted In Situ Keratomileusis, had treated professional athletes before beginning the philanthropic service for Olympic-caliber athletes.

"Vision plays a huge role in almost every sport. All these guys are talking about speed and that competitive edge," Silverman said of Livingston. "They're worrying about their contact lenses falling out and their vision going blurry. So this surgery gives them one less thing to worry about."

Plus, providing the surgery at no charge to athletes whose funds are committed solely to training and travel was important for Silverman.

LASIK, which is considered a cosmetic procedure, can run up to \$3,000 per eye and is not covered by insurance.

"These kids don't (compete) for the money," he said. "Most of them have nothing to gain

financially. They compete because they want to be the best and I greatly admire that."

For speedskater Hedrick, who was formerly nearsighted, the LASIK surgery could mean all the difference in a sport where the margin between victory and defeat is razor-thin.

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Dr. Cary Silverman, left, with Olympic medal-winner speedskater Chad Hedrick, who received a free LASIK procedure from the East Hanover LASIK specialist.

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Staff photo: Dawn Benko

Dr. Cary Silverman performs LASIK surgery on Frank Smith of Paramus.

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"Seeing as close to the blocks as possible over 1,500 meters or 5,000 or 10,000 meters can take time off your race," the three-time Olympic medalist said last week. "I figured my vision was bad enough that it may have put a couple of seconds on the clock that I didn't need."

Silverman's patient list includes a who's who of U.S. Olympians who have found past glory and have great aspirations for the Winter Olympics this February and the Summer Games in London 2012.

In addition to Hedrick, Silverman has treated fellow speedskater Katherine Reutter, freestyle skier Kristi Leskinen, 2008 Olympic Bronze Medalist BMX racer Jill Kintner and her training partner, 2012 Olympic hopeful Arielle Martin.

Martin, 24, was convinced to have LASIK done after Kintner returned from her surgery "seeing clear as a bell," she wrote in an e-mail to the Daily Record. The cyclist flew in from South Africa last month to have Silverman correct her astigmatism and nearsightedness, which eliminated the danger of losing her depth perception on the track.

"I think it's fantastic, his interest in working with Olympic athletes," she wrote. ""As an athlete, sometimes it can be difficult working with insurance to cover an elective procedure like this one. Were it not for his assistance, I couldn't have afforded to do it, so I am especially grateful."

Hedrick, too, expressed his gratitude for Silverman's service.

"For years to come, my vision will be better for what he's done," he said. "I'm glad he's willing to support Olympic athletes and giving me the opportunity to do this."

But 10 years ago, when LASIK was created as the next generation in refractive surgery, various complications arose, including glare, irregular astigmatism, over- and under-correction and scarring of the corneas.

Today, specialists are working with newer lasers that offer improvement in night vision and have weeded out patients who are not viable LASIK candidates, such as those with thin and irregular corneas.

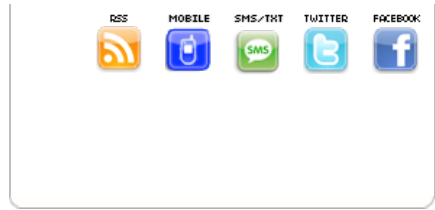
"There are better techniques in detecting patients that might have potential problems," Silverman said. "If someone's not a good candidate, it's a risky procedure."

Ophthalmologist Peter Hersh, director of the Cornea & Laser Eye Institute in Teaneck, said the evolution of laser technology over the past decade has led to better visual quality and improved safety for patients.

"There has not been a marked change in the procedure, per se," said Hersh, who helped develop the first FDA-approved laser in the mid '90s. "Our better understanding of the proper optics to place onto the cornea with the excimer laser has substantially improved outcomes and substantially diminished side effects."

"With some of the older lasers, there was a 10 percent enhancement rate, meaning three or four months later, you'd have to go back and touch it up," added Silverman. "Now, there's a 99 percent chance to get it in one try."

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